

Houston CityBook

Fall 2016
Premier Issue

**HOUSTON
ROCKS!**
Cammie
Gilbert,
Heavy Metal
Sweetheart

UH'S
HIGH-TECH
HUNT *for the*
LOST CITY
of the
MONKEY
GOD

SEXY
'70s-CHIC
FALL
FASHION

GREEK
FEST
AT 50

LEE
ELLIS
2.0

THE
ALLEY'S
SHAKESPEARE
STUDS

PLUS

'Deepwater Horizon'
Micaiah Walker
Tilman Fertitta
& Everything
You Never Knew
About Beyoncé

*"Life is rich, beauty
is everywhere, every
personal connection has
meaning and laughter is
life's sweetest creation."
—SUSAN SMITH JONES*





FEEDER
ART

Material Gains
Angel Rios in the Ken Kehoe showroom in the Decorative Center, where AER Textiles are displayed

Magic Carpets

Part artist and part entrepreneur, luxury rug maker Angel Rios champions Houston artists — and invites you to walk all over them. **By Edward Nawotka, Photos by Alefiya Akbarally**

Angel Rios designs heavenly rugs. Heavenly, because these bespoke, pricey floor coverings are woven out of wool and silk and tufted by hand in the high climes of Tibet and Nepal — literally as close as you can get to heaven on Earth.

Rios, now 37, got his start in the rug trade after getting fed up with working as a private banker at J.P. Morgan. “I wanted to pursue a profession that satisfied my aesthetic and creative interests,” he says. His curiosity led him to working with Hokanson custom rug makers in Houston, which in turn landed him a gig helping produce rugs for the Governor’s Mansion in Austin. After a stint in New York with top interior design firm Fortuny, Rios returned to launch his own new line of floor coverings this year in Houston, after he was invited to be a part of the Ken Kehoe showroom at the Decorative Center.

Together with his business partner David Domangue, a 27-year-old former J. Crew stylist, Rios launched AER Textiles, now offering something new to the market: rugs inspired by and created in collaboration with local artists. “In this way, we are harking back to the much older tradition of tapestry-making,” explains Rios. “Historically, you hung the tapestry — which is

basically a rug — on the wall as art. Now we’re taking the art, and turning it into something beautifully functional.”

The process of creation involves a bit of artistic voodoo, but is enabled by advances in digital scanning and design software, which allow Rios to reproduce a design, scale it and add contour and texture.

Some of AER’s collaborators are well established local artists such as Rusty Arena, Rene Garza and Nicola Parente. But it’s the opportunities that the duo are offering to emerging artists that may be the most exciting. These new artists include Kornelia Krslovic, a student at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology, who began working with Rios after he was impressed by the edgy organic watercolor paintings she submitted to a design competition; and Magdalena Pamula, a Polish painter who produces vibrant geometric patterns.

And AER is going a step further. Rios and Domangue will soon offer Houston’s emerging textile-design community another home by converting their warehouse in EaDo into an experimental workspace for young creators. “We’ve taken in donations of leftover materials from clients and designers,” says Rios. “So far, we’ve collected some 200 bolts of fabric; we are creating a textile resource library that we can open to

> young artists who want come in and experiment with material design.”

It goes without saying that Rios is hard at work on his own designs as well. He is, like his creations, understated in his style — stubble, jeans, fresh white Converse All Stars — and easy-going, but with an edge of rakishness. He offers a playful smile when he admits to having taken some commissions that led to some rather curious, custom pieces for clients: A design that echoes the curves of and colors of a woman’s vulva is one example.

But so far, it is the art-based originals that have attracted the most attention. Rug designs licensed from Parente and Pamula’s art are going into the new BHP Billiton building on Post Oak, and AER has also produced rugs for the new Galleria-area Astoria high-rise and more



Weaving a Story Left to right: Fine art used to create AER Textiles includes “Andante d’Oro” and “Fantasie Improptu” by Argentinian painter Nicolas Urquiza; “Retro Renew” by Houston’s Nicola Parente was converted into a rug.

than a half-dozen private homes. The rugs are available to order, and prices are in line with those of other custom, high-end designer floor-coverings — or, jokes Rios, “perhaps just a tiny bit more.”

This is just the start, says Rios, who notes that there is no reason that AER’s partnerships with artists can’t extend

into a broader range of textiles, such as upholstery or window dressings. But for now, rugs — bespoke, beautiful, luxurious rugs — are enough.

“Just feel this,” says Rios, running his hand along a hand-tufted Tibetan silk-and-wool sample swatch. “Doesn’t this just feel divine?” ■

DARINGLY DIGITAL

A pioneer in making textiles from art, Rusty Arena conquers a new medium: the computer.

By Edward Nawotka,
Photo by Alefiya Akbarally



Art Smart
Textile artist
Rusty Arena

RUSTY ARENA HAD already had a long career working in textiles — from upholstery to wall coverings — when he was approached by Angel Rios to have some of his designs turned into rugs. “It has been a new experience and fun so far,” says Arena while roaming his warehouse-like studio in Northeast Houston. “Seeing my designs in Angel’s creations reminds me a bit of sculptural bas-reliefs: There’s a textural topography to the surface.”

Rugs are not the only new project on Arena’s agenda. This fall he’ll open an exhibit at the Jung Center highlighting a new series of tonal glyph prints. “These works are very different for me, and are really strange insofar as they seemed to have sprung directly from my unconscious.”

At first and up close, the prints are beautiful but meaningless, the work of someone with OCD intent on covering a sheet of paper with random strokes from a grey marker. And, confesses

Arena, “I drew them almost casually, as a way of expending extra energy at the end of the day and to keep the flow going. I thought nothing of them.”

But inspiration hit after he brought them to his design assistant Lee Wilde, who began to transform them on the computer. Suddenly, a series of patterns emerged. “We both saw it. It was like all of a sudden, ‘Wow, there’s the art,’” he says.

The resulting large-format prints offer a coherent but mysterious series of visualizations (a cross here, an egg there) that mutate as the viewer moves. Part inspiration, part optical illusion, part pure gestural imagery.

As for his part in the creation of the work, Arena is happy to say that the result is “computer-assisted.” But, he contends, the resulting work is no less profound for it: “It’s so strange. The final image wouldn’t exist without the digital intervention, yet somehow they always existed.” ■